



# EARLY EDUCATORS

A Folio for Educators by Educators

Issue No. 35 : June 2020



A Publication of the Association for Early Childhood Educators (Singapore)

MCI (P) 033/01/2020



## Respecting Babies: A New Look at Magda Gerber's RIE Approach by Ruth Anne Hammond

Christine Soo

National Institute of Early Childhood Development



*Respecting Babies: A New Look at Magda Gerber's RIE Approach* is an easy-to-read and engaging summary of the history and methods of care originally conceived by Magda Gerber, an apprentice of Dr Emmi Pikler, the founder of the Resources for Infant Educators (RIE) programme. This 130-page practical guidebook is divided into two parts. In Part One, the author engages readers by providing ample relevant examples to build security and create cooperation through respectful interactions and focuses on strategies to support the young children's initiative, integrity and autonomy in Part Two.

Educators will gain insight to provide support to babies and toddlers in a way that allows the latter to become confident explorers. The well-written book highlights the importance of following routines, using language and creating safe environments in order to promote a child's abilities to experiment, explore and learn, and provides suggestions of practical and relevant practices in group care settings.

The how, what, why and when of caregiving practices are provocations to help readers respect babies in order to better relate to them to focus on the babies rather than the caregiving tasks or objects or toys that we extend to them.

The author shared thought provoking strategies for educators to work towards partner-dancing with the young children as they learn and follow each other's cues and find joy in their relationship to develop a strong base for developing the trust and curiosity, language and literacy, and social-emotional skills that the children will need all their lives.

The partner-dancing or being in tune with the babies enables educators to observe and follow the babies' cues and response in an unhurried manner. Both the child and educator will enjoy the precious intimate time that lead to equally balanced emotional fulfilment and emphasises on developing a strong sense of agency of the child to be confident explorers.

The author pointed out that the gentleness and roughness with which we lift, carry and manipulate with the infants' and toddlers' bodies determines how willing they are to



open themselves to us and to the world. She explained that educarers can make the daily caregiving opportunities for the babies to discover the joy of being alive and of being together with another person. Furthermore, by enlisting the babies' cooperation when being picked up is validating for the children and this also makes the job easier and more enjoyable for the educarer. During bath time, babies will learn to tune in to their own body and the sensations coming through it into their awareness if the educarer is attuned to them.

To invite the children to open themselves to us, the educarer ought to speak to the infant quietly about what is happening and waits for a response from the infant who is in a quiet-alert state. The educarer gives full attention to the infant, does not feel rushed and sees the relationship as more important than the task, and the infant becomes comfortable and secure on the basis of the quality attention received from the educarer. I strongly agree that infants benefit from the presiding educarer's thoughtful and undivided attention regardless of the number of times diapering or feeding takes place. Therefore, educarers will need to be more patient with children who display less natural regularity. These children may need even more carefully adhered to sequencing of daily events to help them create a sense of inner order.

The author recommended one-on-one mealtimes during feeding to allow babies to learn that needs are met best by loving social interactions, more than by objects. However, in a group care setting, educarers should consider being prepared, striking a balance between in pace with the babies given the time constraints, coaxing rather than coercing, and being aware of the need to respect infants despite the myriad personal and societal reasons. This adaptation will be more practical as the educarer-child ratio cannot allow for one-on-one mealtimes, most of the time.

One of the key messages of RIE is how to organise a comfortable caregiving area and safe space in which infants are free to move and play without interference. Educarers can give the infants opportunities to maximise the use of space, time and resources. To this end, the RIE approach discourages confining infants in a playpen and advises rearrangement of the space and use of appropriate safety equipment that would provide necessary restrictions when educarers are too busy with other tasks. Supervision is defined as seeing the big picture, not necessarily seeing every moment of every child's day. This definition is more realistic as no educarer can have their eyes trained on a baby 100% of his/her waking hours. Instead, focused attention can be given to the child during care and a safe play place for the others who are exploring within the group.

An interesting aspect that the author highlighted was children's difficulty in discerning how much of toys is 'enough'. She noted that children who have too many toys have a harder time playing peacefully and learning to share than children who have less. I concur that if an educarer wants to give a gift to a child that lasts forever, the child could be better served if



the educator offers her time rather than some object. Also, educators should practise quiet observation of the infants' play to make psychic space for them to explore and delve deeply into their inquiries so that baby does not have to waste energy screening out irrelevant chatter or be distracted.

Another RIE practice that educators can adopt is to create an environment from which infants and toddlers do not need to retreat on an ongoing basis. The author suggested playing high quality music at specific times, at a volume that is not too loud and for a duration that holds their attention. However, she did not explain what high quality music is. I believe educators can contextualise music to the local context and provide different genres for enjoyment in addition to nursery rhymes.

RIE approach also emphasises on the rights of the child. An important task for educators is to provide access to the beauty and freedom of the natural world for even the youngest babies. Depending on the culture and desire to provide complete environments both indoors and outdoors, educators can creatively curate experiences for babies to do outdoors. This may reduce the claustrophobic effects of being enclosed within four walls that may jangle both the children's and educators' nerves. While educators support the young children's development and learning, the latter will appreciate and benefit from developing intellect, self-awareness and relationships in a holistic and integrated way.

The author presented an argument about why educators should talk to babies. I agree that infants acquire language from adults speaking to them in the everyday occurrences that are the events of their lives, and unless the baby has a special need that gets in the way, he will be learning language, whether verbal or nonverbal, in everyday interactions. Hence, educators should describe and talk to babies about the things that concern them, what they are sensing, what people near them are doing and what they might be feeling. Babies absorb language from their social environment and it makes sense for educators in group care settings to talk to babies. Educators can adopt the RIE approach to early or preliteracy for children from birth to three – to include respectful oral communication about things relevant to them, access to interesting books and storytelling, and to complement nursery rhymes, songs and the spontaneous play with words to build language and relationships.

The RIE approach advocates educators promoting clear and consistent limits to help children develop a sense of security and trust in others and themselves. I particularly like the strategy of the traffic light concept for selective intervention to support child guidance. Educators need not intervene if the child is in a green situation that he can handle. In a red light situation where safety or social rule is breached, educators intervene calmly, swiftly, unambiguously and respectfully. Yellow light signifies that the child is able to manage the situation on his own. Here, educators observe to see what may be needed and make quick decisions with patience.



The author advised all educarers working with infants and toddlers learning about and operating their bodies to remember Magda's caveat – 'Never put a baby into a position she cannot get into or out of all by herself'. This is because as infants become toddlers, they start to take more risks, and the educarer's attitude toward their explorations has a big impact on their sense of competence and self-confidence.

Another aspect which educarers ought to be mindful of would be to allow lots of uninterrupted time for infants and toddlers to play in an environment that includes peers and a variety of authentic objects to explore, and be reflective of Jean Piaget's quotation – 'whenever we teach a child something, we forever destroy his chance to discover it for himself'. The author cited Magda explaining that we may be interfering with what the baby is learning. Hence, educarers can let babies know by our appreciative attention that their experiences are valued. Educarers can let them lead but do not override their self-confidence by assuming our ideas have more value than theirs. These reminders help educarers develop an inner understanding to better respect babies as human beings who are curious, competent and creative.

The author also highlighted Magda's viewpoint that passive toys make active children and active toys make passive children, and there is a need to distinguish between play and entertainment when facilitating children's play. I foresee these understanding will enable educarers to develop infants to become deeply engaged, creative and productive people by providing opportunities for them to become active constructors of experiences and to develop into secure and confident explorers.

Be it caregiving or during play, it is important for educarers to intervene selectively when facilitating interactions. Positive interactions can be promoted if babies are grouped in a safe, well-planned space with the educarer nearby who facilitates calmly and selectively. It is important for educarers to trust infants' ability to handle their feelings when conflicts arise, and not impose adult notions of justice. This useful reminder will prompt educarers to remember that making children share before they can understand is tantamount to abusing adult's power over them to make ourselves feel better. Another useful reminder for educarers to walk the talk of accepting that life brings challenges and challenges bring not only tears but also important learning opportunities so as to be on the same wavelength of the child without over-empathizing.

You will find it intriguing how the author related so deeply with the inner self of infants and toddlers, yet she stated that toddlers are challenging and difficult to raise and care for because they are ready to test their power. I beg to differ, when toddlers have formed a secure attachment with the educarer, they are able to develop mutual respect and have fun together with the educarer by coordinating their actions and intentions.



An interesting strategy recommended by the author is sportscasting. This is about guiding interactions without being judgemental and it helps educarers hone their observation skills. Educarers can leave the children to solve their problems creatively. This does not mean not saying 'no' when the need arises. Educarers need to be aware that babies behave aggressively for the same reasons that adults do, such as hunger, fear, needs not met, frustration, fear, etc. Rather than shaming, punishing or practising time-out, educarers need to ensure that the child feels safe in the environment and encourage time-in with a hug to reset his nervous system.

With appropriate sources and levels of sensory stimulation, infants will satisfy themselves by engaging in a wide range of exploratory behaviours that are self-initiated and that allow them to manage their attention as their increasing understanding and the environment intersect. The author explained the importance for educarers to ensure that each child has sufficient access to trusted attachment figures who are fully present during caregiving moments, who provide the setting and time for autonomous exploration and who take the trouble to screen out children's exposure to harmful stimuli as best as they can. This way, infants and toddlers will be able to focus their attention on what is truly important – satisfaction of relationships with attuned adults, the joy of discovery, play with peers, and the rewards of creative problem solving. This is supported by Magda who explained that only then can educarers contribute to a more respectful world.

This book is a good read and if you would like to adopt simple realistic practices, you will enjoy how the author delved deeply to nudge you to enhance your art of educating. I recommend that every educarer of young children should read it to gain deeper understanding of the young child and become more reflective practitioners to relate well to the babies in order to nurture them to optimise the children's development and growth. However, the book can include visuals to cater to the need of readers who may find the book too heavy in wordy content.